

PHOENIX, Ariz. - U.S. Rep. Ed Pastor, D-Ariz., has introduced legislation that healthcare community leaders believe will help stem the tide of the nursing shortage in fast-growing states like Arizona.

"I was happy to introduce this legislation because, while we urgently need more nurses, many nursing education programs are full and qualified students must wait to get into them," Pastor said. "This legislation will use federal and state funds to expand the capacity of nursing education programs and help us get ahead of the nursing shortage."

The America's Partnership for Nursing Education Act of 2007 (H.R. 2794) will allow colleges and universities to hire additional nursing program faculty in order to graduate more registered nurses (RNs). The legislation proposes a \$20 million annual appropriation for fiscal years 2008-12 and grants qualifying states a minimum of \$2 million per year to increase the capacity of their nursing education programs.

"Arizona and other states have been swimming upstream in their efforts to address the nursing shortage," said Adda Alexander, RN, executive vice president of the Arizona Hospital and Healthcare Association (AzHHA). "With this legislation, Rep. Pastor has thrown a life preserver to nurses, hospitals and the patients they serve. He has demonstrated his leadership on an issue of importance to the future health of Arizona and many other states."

States that qualify for the America's Partnership for Nursing Education grants must demonstrate they are:

- Experiencing explosive population growth, with the U.S. Census Bureau projecting their total population to increase by more than 50 percent from 1990-2025;
- Anticipating substantial future shortages, specifically fewer than 555 employed registered nurses per 100,000 population by 2020, as measured by the Health Resources and Services Administration;
- Sponsoring a state-based program to increase nursing education program faculty; and
- Investing a minimum of \$2 million a year (2008-12) in a state-sponsored program to increase the number of college and university nursing faculty.

For Arizona, America's Partnership for Nursing Education is the next wave of a plan state Sen. Carolyn Allen (R-Scottsdale) unveiled on Jan. 31, 2005. On that date, Sen. Allen introduced Arizona's Partnership for Nursing Education, legislation to expand the capacity of the college and university nursing education programs by investing \$20 million over five years.

"I was proud to sponsor state legislation establishing Arizona's Partnership for Nursing Education," said Sen. Allen. "This legislation is helping our state universities and community colleges expand their nursing education programs and graduate more registered nurses. However, state funds alone cannot meet the needs of a state that is growing as quickly as Arizona. That's why I am very pleased that Congressman Pastor has introduced federal legislation that will, hopefully, allow Arizona to continue the good work our nursing programs are doing to ensure there will be registered nurses to care for people throughout Arizona for years to come."

Since its enactment, Arizona's Partnership for Nursing Education has funded 42 additional nursing faculty positions in colleges to increase the number of RN graduates by approximately 1,000 by 2009. Additionally, according to the Arizona Board of Regents, the state's three universities will double their 2002-03 RN program graduates to 620 in the 2007-08 academic year.

Even with progress like this, Arizona faces a dire shortage of healthcare professionals. Hospitals and other providers struggle to fill RN positions while nursing students who are qualified and accepted into programs must wait to begin their education because the programs are filled to capacity. At the same time, Arizona's hospitals are building new and expanding existing facilities to meet the healthcare needs of the fastest growing state in the nation. According to a recent study by Arizona State University's L. William Seidman Research Institute, more than 2,900 new inpatient beds will open in Arizona from 2007-11. This year, three hospitals are scheduled to open in Arizona. During 2005-06, six new hospitals opened in the state.

"Who will care for the patients in those new hospital beds is a question keeping many a hospital executive awake at night," said John Rivers, AzHHA's president and CEO. "Rep. Pastor's announcement is welcome news to hospitals leaders throughout the state. Coupled with the state's APNE program this will make a huge difference to fast-growing states like Arizona."

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Arizona ranks 45th in the nation for its ratio of employed registered nurses (RNs). The state has 681 RNs per 100,000 population, well below the national average of 825 nurses per 100,000 population. With Arizona's population expected to grow to 8.5 million by 2020, the state's RNs per capita will dip to an alarming 356 per 100,000 population.

"We're treading water right now in terms of our ability to staff our hospitals with their most essential caregivers: registered nurses," Rivers said. "Without the federal and state support for nursing education, I would be very concerned about the future of our healthcare delivery system."